




Vital Statistics: American Folk Drawings
and Watercolors from a Private Collection



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Vital Statistics: American Folk Drawings and Watercolors from a Private Collection



ESSAY BY PHILIP M. ISAACSON H'83

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine 1986

This catalogue accompanies an exhibition of the same name
at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art from September 11 to November 9, 1986.

Cover: Details adapted from catalogue no. 12, *True Lover's Knot*

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Foreword

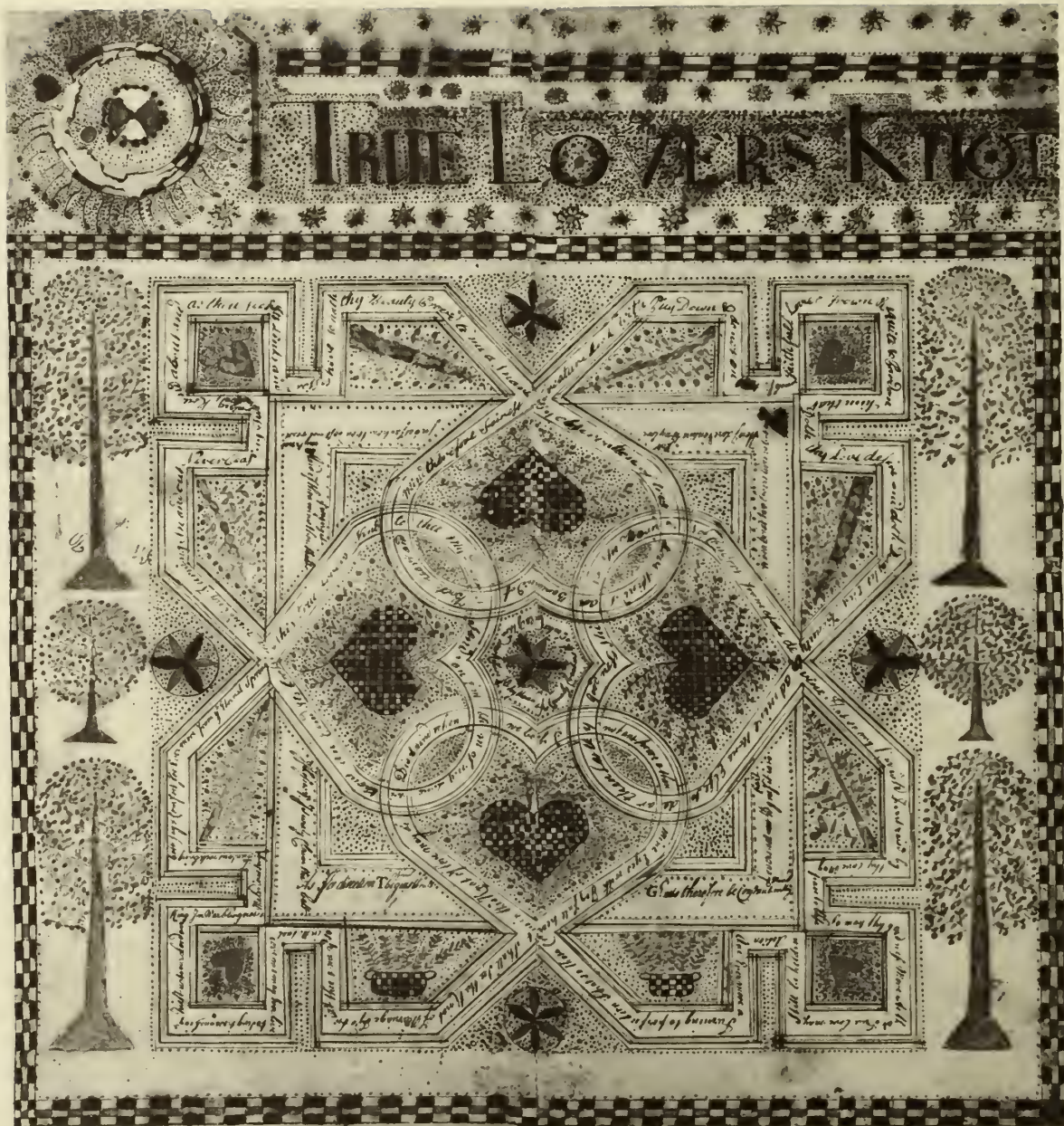
There is an irony to this collection of American folk drawings. None of these works was intended by the artist or patron to be collected, much less publicly exhibited. They do not pretend to be high art. Yet, it is that very lack of pretense that makes these drawings so compelling. In them, the artist is employed in the embroidery of facts: dates of births, marriages, and deaths; records of property and ownership. The simple data of life are given grace and dignity.

In his catalogue essay, Philip M. Isaacson h'83, a longtime friend of the museum and an avid student of American folk art, rightly stresses the universal character of folk idioms. What was once boasted of as indigenously American should properly be regarded as no more than a dialect of a global language. Too often, misplaced patriotism clouds our understanding of art. We thank Mr. Isaacson for clearing the air.

Vital Statistics: American Folk Drawings and Watercolors from a Private Collection is presented at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art through the friendship and generosity of lenders who have chosen to remain anonymous. Their collection, one of the finest of its kind in the country, has a lyrical innocence and special beauty that is the charm of folk art. We deeply appreciate their willingness to share it with us.

I wish also to express my gratitude to Katharine J. Watson, director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art; to Stephen Harvard, designer of the catalogue; to Susan L. Ransom, editor of the text; and to Lucie G. Teegarden, associate director of public relations and publications, who supervised production of the catalogue. The entire museum staff contributed to the success of this project. I thank them all.

John W. Coffey II
Curator of Collections



12. Artist unknown *True Lover's Knot*

Vital Statistics

It would be pleasant to be able to say that these late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century watercolors and drawings are spontaneous expressions of the American spirit. And it would be easy to do so. While enough has been written about American folk art to support such a notion, most of it is romantic nonsense. Speaking softly of their time, these gentle works are not truly indigenous to our land. They didn't spring full-blown from a young national psyche. Their naiveté and optimism are more a compliment to an age than to a people. It would be more accurate to say that most are non-academic forms, universally applied. Although we have adopted them in support of our notion of simpler and perhaps happier national times, they are less ours than we would like them to be. Some among them may indeed prove to be folk art when that term is at last defined, but they will remain less than entirely American.

I know of an enchanting work—mystical, messianic—that many shrewd observers have seen as a Shaker gift drawing, a record of a spiritual vision made by a Shaker sister in Mount Lebanon, New York, in, say, 1845. Appraised more soberly, it must surely be English. But for the Union Jack, exact counterparts of American family records came from English hands in the early 1800s, and a French schoolboy of the period created a copybook which, except for language, could have come from Newburyport, Massachusetts. The true lover's knot in this collection (no. 12) is an Elizabethan form, and those works with complex Masonic imagery have English parentage. In Paris, I once saw a mourning picture which at first I took to be a school exercise, common to the 1830s, memorializing Washington. On inspection, it proved to commemorate the death of Napoleon. And in Seville, at the Indies Archives, there are illuminated surveys and plans for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century towns in Peru that might have graced the records of the early proprietors of Falmouth or Prout's Neck, Maine. If this collection is evidence of a gentle innocence, then we must share that quality with other peoples. The openness, optimism, and naive expectancy of a young nation are on its sheets, but those virtues are more universal than we are accustomed to allowing.

For the most part, the works in the collection, through family statistics, record the passage of time. In them you will find the markings of marriages, births, and ultimately, deaths. While styles vary, there are certain general types, the most common of which is the family record. It is a full account of family events—happy and dolorous—and may span a century or more. It is not unusual to find a record that notes both a birth in the eighteenth century and a death, in succeeding generations, in the twentieth century. The notion of collecting family records is quite new. Their closest relatives, the Pennsylvania frakturs, have been admired for generations. Frakturs, with their easy suavity, ingratiate themselves quickly. When they leave the hand of their maker, they are complete.



41. Artist unknown Zechariah Wood—Sally Bacon Family Record

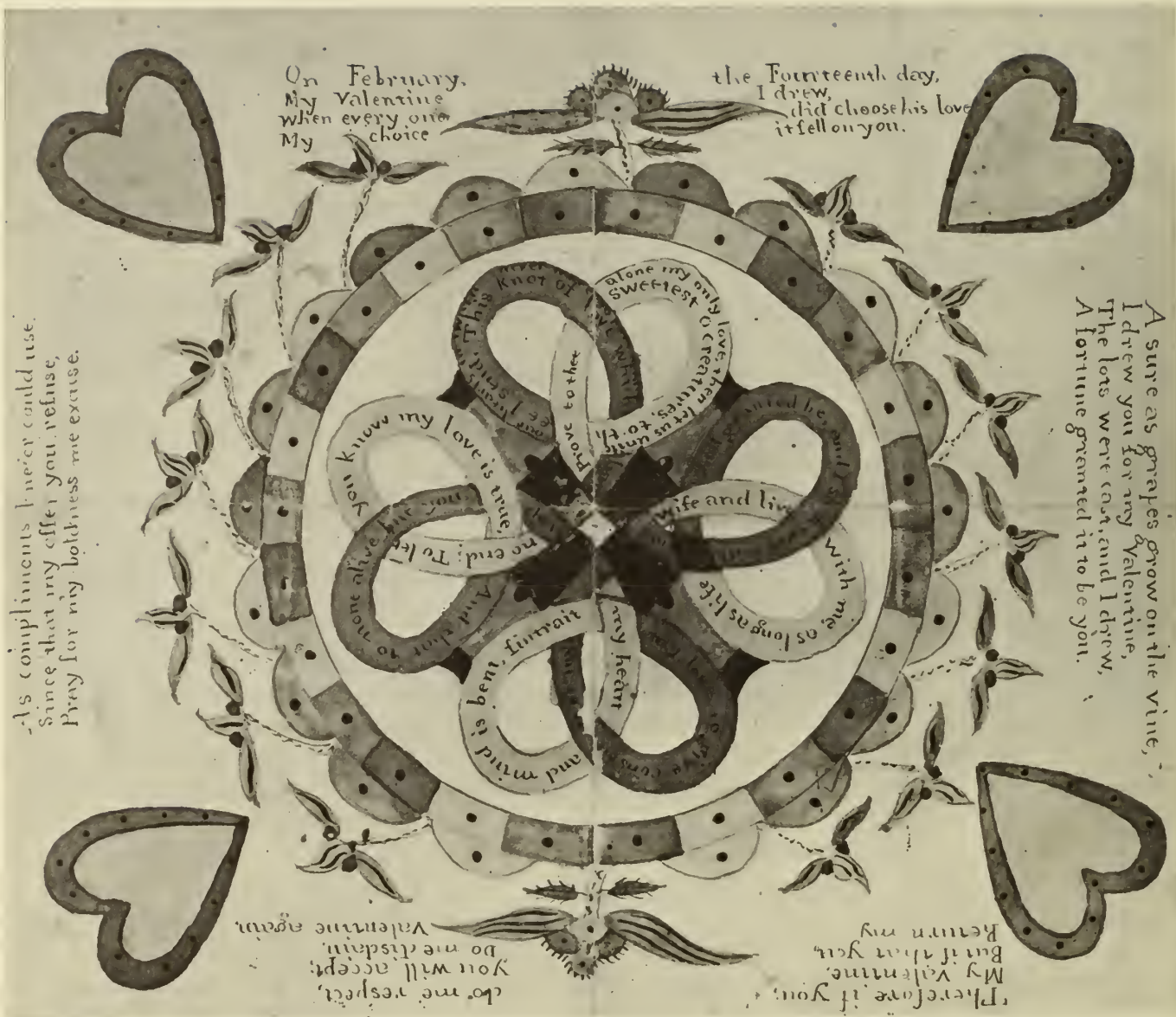
They record a single event, a birth, a baptism, perhaps the ownership of a holy book. There is nothing to be added, and hence each is visually homogeneous.

New England family records, on the other hand, were produced as a kind of blank form. The maker noted past events and provided blanks for those yet to occur. Filling in was done over the years by various hands—and pens—with mixed aesthetic results. Because they do not have the immediacy—the quick decorative impact—of the Pennsylvania watercolors, New England family records were late in attracting attention. Recently, however, the New England records, for all of their vagaries and sloppy moments, have come to be admired for their elemental harmony and tranquil measure. Their local innocence and ordered clarity, once observed, are captivating. Birth, marriage, and death records do exist as single documents, but they are much less common. Because they mark one event, like Pennsylvania work, they were complete when produced and are free of latter-day distractions.

The remainder of this collection is bewildering in its variety. It deals not with family landmarks, but with the social and academic concerns of the first third of the last century. There are valentines and their near-relatives, true lover's knots. There are bookplates, calligraphy exercises, trade cards, sampler facsimiles, presentation pieces, and survey maps. There are name sheets, copybook pages, and memorials. There is even a plan entitled *The Funeral Procession of the American Hero George Washington* (no. 17). Not included in this collection, but within its genre, are rewards of merit, decorated music sheets, metamorphoses, schoolgirl maps (as they are called), and pious mottoes. There is also an almost uncatalogable body of work relating to the life, death, and apotheosis of George Washington. It is eloquent evidence of his place in the hearts of his countrymen.

Certain themes cut across the works in this collection. Masonry is the most obvious. There is a family record embellished with Masonic devices, a birth record of a Mason-to-be, and an award to a retiring militiaman which has various Masonic references. The acrostic is another popular device found in the works. It appears, among other places, in birth records and presentation pieces. The display of the alphabet as a graphic convention often appears, as do hearts, birds, urns, willows, and portraits. Some of the latter are specific to an event, for example, a willow on a mourning sheet, but others are sprinkled liberally around with more regard for decorative effect than for relevance. The *Winthrop Eager Acrostic* (no. 23) is, logically, illuminated by a fetchingly fierce portrait of Sargent Eager, but for no obvious reason *Calligraphy Examples* (no. 37), by Araunah Judd, bears a pair of unidentified figures.

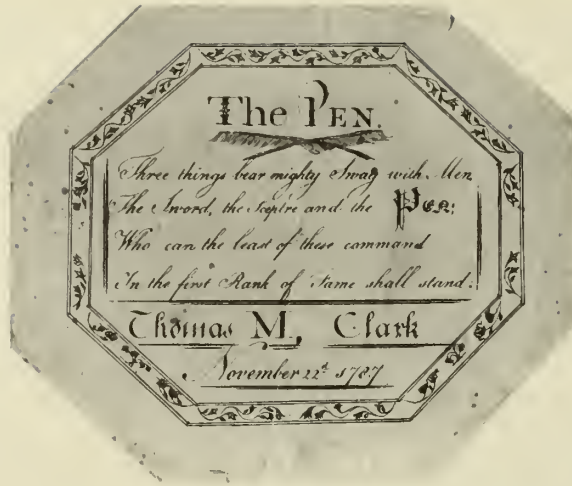
Decorative themes are sometimes entirely idiosyncratic. There are winged heads taken from gravestones, portions of the great seals of our states, and the unique forms of the painter of the *Zechariah Wood–Sally Bacon Family Record* (no. 41). That unknown artist flourished in Vermont about 1837 and left behind him a graphic system that merges the vision of William Blake with an anticipation of Art Nouveau. It's a bizarre and remarkable achievement.



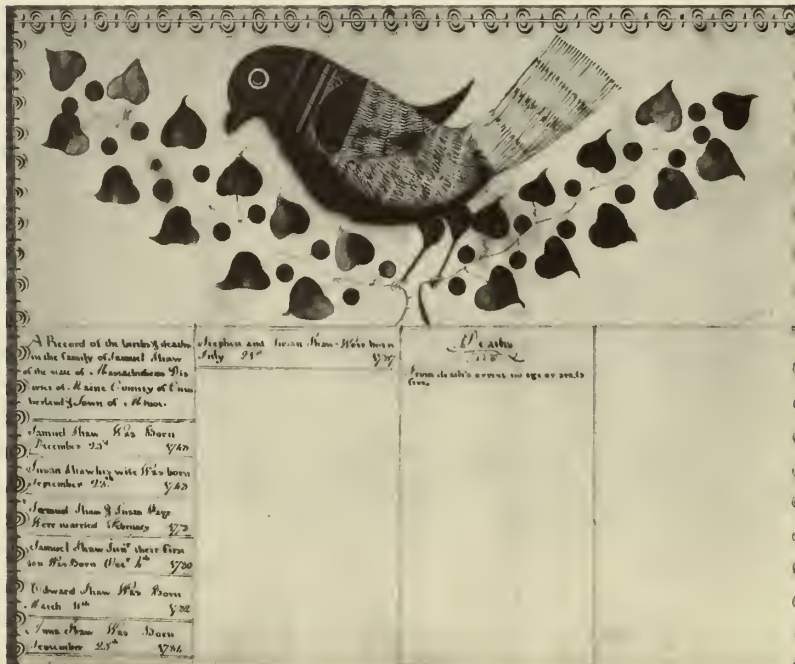
As to period, the watercolors range from Moses Banks's 1770 *A Plan of Division* of Prout's Neck, Maine (no. 2), to the 1854 *Adoniram J. Hogan–Jane H. Denham Family Record* (no. 44) by the Heart and Hand Artist. The makers, as they are sometimes called, are school children, adult amateurs, and professionals. The maker known as "J.W." who produced the *James Wilson–Kezia Young Family Record* (no. 22) of 1811 was possibly James Wilson of Harpswell, Maine. He must have been a part-time professional, as was Moses Connor of New Hampshire, the artist of the *Theodore Gilman–Mehitabel Richards Family Record* (no. 27) of 1813. Nathaniel D. Gould, the maker of his trade card (no. 39), was a writing master in Concord, New Hampshire, in 1834 and in Brooklyn, New York, in 1835. William Saville was a professional on the Massachusetts North Shore in the very early nineteenth century. He is represented here by the *Captain Isaac Harding Memorial* (no. 16) of 1801.

The most elusive of the professionals is the Heart and Hand Artist. This maker flourished briefly, from about 1850 to 1855, at a time when the family record tradition was almost closed. Lithographic blanks available from Kellogg in Hartford, Connecticut, and from Currier in New York at small cost were fatal competition. Yet, the Heart and Hand Artist produced what, for the genre, is a sizable body of work and did so with a crisp, linear hand (nos. 43, 44). Such contemporaries as existed had succumbed to the romantic excesses of the age while the Heart and Hand master worked in a manner that would have been comfortable to Moses Connor, the master's predecessor by at least thirty years.

This, then, is a small accumulation of American watercolors and simple drawings taken from or sharing in the tradition of non-academic European painting, produced by school children as exercises, or by near-professionals to memorialize a range of occasions. Whether they are to be regarded as folk art is not a pressing concern. Of more importance and delight is their evocation of a fresh, optimistic time in our history. The frankness and immediacy of these works makes the spirit of that time more real than the more elaborate efforts of the period's best painters.



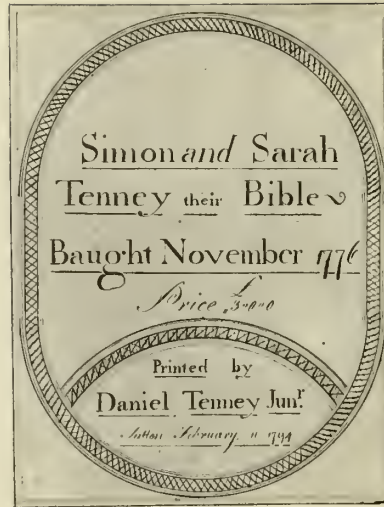
7. Thomas M. Clark
"The Pen"
 (calligraphy exercise)



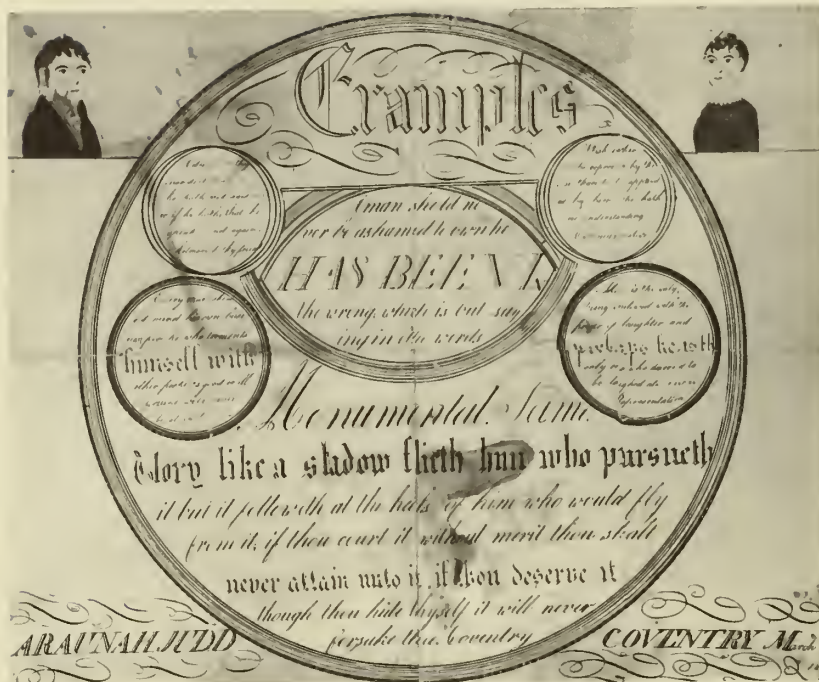
8. Artist unknown
Samuel Shaw-Susan Page
Family Record

Works in the Exhibition

- Artist unknown
Connecticut
- 1 *Anthony and Hannah Mors Family Record*, circa 1769
Watercolor and ink on paper
35.5 × 28.5 cm (14 × 11¼ in.)
- Moses Banks
Scarborough, Maine
- 2 *A Plan of Division*, 1770
Watercolor and ink on paper
30.8 × 38.9 cm (12½ × 15½ in.)
- Artist unknown
Newburyport, Massachusetts
- 3 *John Fletcher–Patience Wonson Family Record*, 1783
Colored inks on paper
17.8 × 21.5 cm (7 × 8⅞ in.)
- Henry G. Jenks
Boston, Massachusetts
- 4 *Commerce* (calligraphy exercise), 1786
Colored inks on paper
Sight: 32.3 × 19.5 cm (12⅝ × 7⅞ in.)
- Artist unknown
New England (?)
- 5 *Twins Memorial*, circa 1786
Colored inks on paper
Sight: 18.2 × 14.9 cm (7⅜ × 5⅞ in.)
- Artist unknown
Maine
- 6 *Samuel Lord–Ruth Lord Marriage Record*, circa 1786
Watercolor and ink on paper
Sight: 22.3 × 17.5 cm (8¾ × 6⅞ in.)
- Thomas M. Clark
Connecticut
- 7 *"The Pen"* (calligraphy exercise), 1787
Ink on paper
14.5 × 17.0 cm (5⅞ × 6⅞ in.)
- Artist unknown
Minot, Maine
- 8 *Samuel Shaw–Susan Page Family Record*, circa 1787 (?)
Watercolor and ink on paper
Sight: 28.3 × 35.1 cm (11⅞ × 13⅜ in.)
- Artist unknown
Massachusetts
- 9 *Malachi Brown–William Brown Memorial*, 1789
Ink on paper
35.0 × 29.7 cm (13¾ × 11⅞ in.)
- Artist unknown
East Washington, New Hampshire
- 10 *Nancy White Birth Record*, circa 1790
Colored inks on paper
24.0 × 20.2 cm (9⅞ × 7⅞ in.)
- Daniel Tenney, Jr.
Sutton, Massachusetts
- 11 *Simon and Sarah Tenney Bookplate*, 1794
Colored inks on paper
19.2 × 14.8 cm (7⅞ × 5⅞ in.)
- Artist unknown
New York/Pennsylvania
- 12 *True Lover's Knot*, circa 1795
Watercolor and ink on paper
40.2 × 37.3 cm (15⅞ × 14⅞ in.)
- Thomas Hadley
Woburn, Massachusetts
- 13 *"T.H." Bookplate*, 1799
Ink on paper
18.5 × 15.5 cm (7¼ × 6⅞ in.)
- Artist unknown
Alton, New Hampshire
- 14 *Jacob Chamberlain, Jr.–Mary Stockbridge Family Record*, 1800
Watercolor and ink on paper
37.8 × 30.5 cm (14⅞ × 12 in.)



11. Daniel Tenney, Jr.
Simon and Sarah
Tenney Bookplate



37. Araunah Judd
Calligraphy Examples
with Portraits

- Betsy Lewis
Dorchester (Boston), Massachusetts
15 *On Washington* (copybook page), 1801
Watercolor and ink on paper
Sight: 18.5 × 15.3 cm (7⁵/₁₆ × 6 in.)
- William Saville
Gloucester, Massachusetts
16 *Captain Isaac Harding Memorial*, 1801
Watercolor and ink on paper
35.8 × 30.4 cm (14¹/₈ × 12 in.)
- Elijah Metcalf
Franklin, Massachusetts
17 *The Funeral Procession of the American Hero
George Washington*, 1801
Ink on paper
33.5 × 19.9 cm (13³/₁₆ × 7¹³/₁₆ in.)
- Artist unknown
Epping, New Hampshire
18 *Gilman Folsom Birth Record*, circa 1805
Colored inks on paper
18.7 × 34.0 cm (7³/₈ × 13³/₈ in.)
- Artist unknown
Wrentham, Massachusetts
19 *Mary Roberhaus Memorial*, circa 1808
Ink on cut paper, backed with silk
16.8 × 17.3 cm (6⁵/₈ × 6¹³/₁₆ in.)
- Warren Nixon
Framingham, Massachusetts
20 *Warren Nixon Bookplate*, 1808
Ink on paper
8.2 × 12.9 cm (3³/₁₆ × 5¹/₁₆ in.)
- William Murray
New York State (?)
21 *George Taylor Memorial*, circa 1808
Watercolor and ink on paper
23.0 × 18.0 cm (9¹/₁₆ × 7¹/₁₆ in.)
- “J.W.” (James Wilson?)
Harpwell, Maine
22 *James Wilson–Kezia Young Family Record*, 1811
Watercolor and ink on paper
37.8 × 30.1 cm (14⁷/₈ × 11⁷/₈ in.)
- H. Wilcox
Connecticut
23 *Winthrop Eager Acrostic (Masonic)*, 1811
Watercolor and ink on paper
46.0 × 30.3 cm (18¹/₈ × 11¹⁵/₁₆ in.)
- Artist unknown
Scarborough, Maine
24 *Peltiah Marr–Sarah Tylar Family Record*, circa 1811
Watercolor and ink on paper
36.3 × 28.2 cm (14⁵/₁₆ × 11¹/₈ in.)
- Abel Wheeler
Boston, Massachusetts
25 *Anna Sawtell Birth Record*, 1812
Ink on paper
22.5 × 17.8 cm (8⁷/₈ × 7 in.)
- Artist unknown
Sanford, Maine
26 *Mercy Abbot Birth Record*, 1813
Ink on paper
Sight: 14.1 × 14.4 cm (5⁹/₁₆ × 5¹¹/₁₆ in.)
- Moses Connor
New Hampshire
27 *Theodore Gilman–Mehitabel Richards Family Record*,
1813
Watercolor and ink on paper
19.4 × 29.0 cm (7⁵/₈ × 11⁷/₁₆ in.)
- Artist unknown
Connecticut
28 *Jacob Deyo–Ruth Smith Family Record*, circa 1813
Watercolor and ink on paper
Sight: 34.7 × 24.3 cm (13¹¹/₁₆ × 9⁹/₁₆ in.)

- Artist unknown
Steep Falls, Maine
29 *Mary Deering Bookplate*, circa 1815
Watercolor and ink on paper
7.3 × 11.5 cm (2⁷/₈ × 4¹/₂ in.)
- “J.W.” (James Wilson ?)
Bartlett, New Hampshire
30 *Obed Hall–Eliza Fox Family Record*, 1817
Watercolor and ink on paper
39.8 × 33.2 cm (15³/₈ × 13¹/₁₆ in.)
- Artist unknown
Massachusetts
31 *Jabez A. Ambsbury Bookplate*, 1818
Watercolor and ink on paper
6.3 × 15.6 cm (2⁷/₁₆ × 6¹/₈ in.)
- Artist unknown
Massachusetts (?)
32 *Presentation to Miss Polly J. Eames*, 1818
Watercolor and ink on cut paper, backed with silk
15.7 × 19.1 cm (6³/₁₆ × 7¹/₂ in.)
- Moses Connor
New Hampshire
33 *Jonathan Chase–Patience Peasley Family Record*, circa 1818
Watercolor and ink on paper
30.4 × 25.3 cm (12 × 9¹⁵/₁₆ in.)
- Warren Nixon
Framingham, Massachusetts
34 *Warren Nixon Bookplate*, 1818
Colored inks on paper
4.1 × 7.9 cm (1⁵/₈ × 3¹/₁₆ in.)
- Salome Rice
Framingham, Massachusetts
35 *Salome Rice Bookplate*, 1818
Colored inks on paper
7.6 × 9.8 cm (2¹⁵/₁₆ × 3¹³/₁₆ in.)
- 36 Another example of no. 35.
- Araunah Judd
Coventry, Connecticut
37 *Calligraphy Examples with Portraits*, 1822
Watercolor and colored ink on paper
32.9 × 40.6 cm (12¹⁵/₁₆ × 16 in.)
- Artist unknown
Bridgton, Maine
38 *Simeon Burnham–Lucy Smith Family Record*, circa 1830
Watercolor and ink on paper
20.2 × 25.3 cm (7¹⁵/₁₆ × 9¹⁵/₁₆ in.)
- Nathaniel Duren Gould (1781–1864)
Concord, New Hampshire (obverse),
Brooklyn, New York (reverse)
39 *Nathaniel D. Gould Trade Cards*, 1834 (obverse),
1835 (reverse)
Two cards: sepia and black ink on paper
Sight: 8.7 × 8.7 cm (3⁷/₁₆ × 3⁷/₁₆ in.)
- Ebenezer Legrow
Cumberland, Maine
40 *Valentine*, circa 1835
Watercolor and ink on paper
Sight: 30.5 × 36.2 cm (12 × 14¹/₄ in.)
- Artist unknown
Vermont
41 *Zechariah Wood–Sally Bacon Family Record*, 1837
Watercolor and ink on paper
22.6 × 35.4 cm (8⁷/₈ × 13¹⁵/₁₆ in.)
- Artist unknown
Maine/New Hampshire
42 *William Edward Bookplate*, 1843
Watercolor and ink on paper.
13.6 × 16.2 cm (5³/₈ × 6³/₈ in.)
- Heart and Hand Artist
Bowdoin, Maine
43 *James O. Dearing Name Sheet*, circa 1850
Watercolor and ink on paper
10.0 × 11.4 cm (3¹⁵/₁₆ × 4³/₈ in.)

Bowdoin, Maine

Record, 1854

Sight: 24.9×34.7 cm ($9^{13/16} \times 13^{11/16}$ in.)

44. Heart and Hand Artist *Adoniram J. Hogan—Jane H. Denham Family Record*

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